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BELFAST MONTHLY MAGAZINE.

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COMMUNICATIONS, ORIGINAL AND SELECTED.

To the Proprietors of the Belfast Magazine.

ON THE USE OF ITALICS, CAPITALS, &c.
IN COMPOSITION.

"A pretty kind of amusement I have been engaged in; commas, semicolons, Italics, and capitals, to make nonsense more pompous, and furbelow bad poetry with good printing."

M. Prior in a letter to Dean Swift.

THESE words were written by Prior, while engaged in preparing for the press, an edition of his poems. Prose writers, as well as poets, place no little stress on the various helps and graces of style, so pleasantly alluded to in the above extract. As to "commas and semicolons," those useful appendages of modern writing; a common knowledge of grammar will sufficiently direct the use of them. The proper use of Italics, is an object undoubtedly of inferior importance, and as I conceive rather matter of taste, than of judgment or understanding. I shall here offer a few remarks upon it, which I shall be very willing to have improved, illustrated or corrected, by the correspondents of the Magazine.

Italics in writing may be regarded as analogous to emphasis in recitation. Each of these marks on written and spoken language, have the same general object, namely, to point out certain words or phrases to the more particular attention of the reader or hearer. We are not, however, so far to confound these two distinctives of language, as to suppose each corresponding to the other, in

the detail; so that, what is printed in Italics, should be pronounced invariably with emphasis, and vice versa, that what is emphatical in correct recitation, ought to be marked, when printed, by Italic letters. The least attention to the manner, in which a judicious reader pronounces a well written composition, will show this clearly enough. However, as in reading, to mark all or nearly all the words of a sentence, by a strong emphatical tone, would argue extreme want of judgment, and mislead or disgust the hearer, so a frequent and injudicious use of Italics and capitals may frequently mislead, and is always disgusting; nor do I know any thing that more evinces the bad taste, or the feeble genius of a writer. Moreover, this perpetual *changing of the letter* is a constant trespass on the reader's attention. He is continually reminded of something very strong, very sublime or beautiful, which there is danger he might not find without a *finger-post*! The effort to bestow due attention upon each of these inviting objects, fatigues sometimes and distresses the attentive reader; and if he meets these *marks of distinction* where they ought not to be, he is farther tempted to suspect for bad taste, affectation or ignorance, the writer that pretends to instruct him.

It is quite a mistake to suppose, that pieces of wit and humour require a sprinkling of Italic words and phrases; since writers the most remarkable for those qualities, make

little or no use of such embellishments. It is enough to name here Swift and Addison. Indeed, it is plain that in every species of writing, the strength and beauty of style, should appear in the words themselves, not in the kind of type in which they are printed. If this plain truism were kept in mind, by our pamphlet and newspaper writers, they might be led to doubt the necessity, and even the propriety, of that copious intermixture of Italics and capital letters, which many of them are wont to indulge in. They might leave some good thing to be discovered. For, surely it is affronting to a reader's senses and judgment, to call upon him, in every half sentence, to admire and remark particularly, such and such parts of what is written, as if he had himself no faculty of discrimination. I especially allude here to some newspaper writers, who put into Italics every phrase and word, which they consider strong, or happy, or appropriate! Than this, I do not know any thing more offensive to the taste of a reader; who cannot be trusted (it seems) to remark himself the propriety of the language; but must be warned by the writer when any of the words he uses are remarkable for being—just what they ought to be! Such self-blazoning as this, is a greater weakness than laughing at one's own jest.

A still more inexcusable weakness is, when these marks are used as a cover for poverty of language, or a passport for some incorrect or ill-chosen expression. I have noticed writers who sometimes take a fancy to vulgar or *slang* words; and that the vulgarity of these, may not be charged upon themselves, and at the same time, they may have credit for all their pointedness, they get them set in Italics. I could multiply instances where the "True art of

sinking," is exerted in prose, with the most scrupulous fidelity, and (under favour of the Italic types) the reader is presented with real genuine "bathos," as so much wit, humour or vivacity. How vain the relief of Italics or dashes, when mean language is adopted by a writer, and applied to a subject of dignity and importance. It is a different case, where the subject justifies the introduction of familiar terms and of the language of low life. In works professedly descriptive of characters among the peasantry, where of course a picture of their manners and habits becomes a necessary part, a recital of their conversation and language is naturally expected. In this, who has succeeded better than our own EDGEWORTH? who yet in describing the manners of her humblest countrymen, is herself still dignified! My animadversions could not, in any point of view, have reference to such cases, I allude to the practice of some political writers, who, in their own proper character, and on their own subject, love to debase their style with vulgarisms and mean epithets, where correct and decent language would answer every purpose of persuading and pleasing infinitely better. This disfiguring of their compositions exhibits the style a mere caricature, devoid alike of form, expression or consistency.

How various the uses and abuses of Italic and capital letters! When I look on the page of certain periodical publications, and see the stripes of those important signals that mark the composition, I promise to myself an animated and eloquent discussion of some interesting question. "Quid dignum tanto?" Alas! on going into the article, I am carried away in the second sentence, clean off the subject announced in the title, which title was prefixed by

chance, being generally borrowed. As one advances over *strong pointed* phrases and *lorry* epithets; the real "subject" is soon not easily ascertained, and shifts continually. For the facts of the case, you are presented with allusions, innuendoes (in *Italics*;) suppositions, assumptions; for argument, you have *strong* declamation, "*assertions en l'air*," high sounding names and the sayings of great men repeated for the thousand and first time. The style, a vapid, diluted phraseology spiced with vulgarisms and cant. In the mean time, lest you *lose sight* of the original subject, you have the title taken down from the head, and posted with some confidential phrases at convenient distances either in *sty* Italics, or *bold* capitals, as the case may demand. Such is the substance of the article. And thus, without gaining one plainly told, useful fact, or meeting one convincing argument, without obtaining a single new idea worth remembering, you are carried through to the end, by the machinery of Italic types and eloquent dashes; leaving you so much the worse than when you began, as simple ignorance is less pernicious than error and confusion. It now appears the Italics were chiefly serviceable, in that they kept up the visible connexion of the whole article with its title and with itself, and gave a forced expression to a false and momentary enthusiasm.

An excessive use of Italics is either the indication of a false taste, or the effort of a weak and imbecile genius.

Having adverted to newspaper writers, I beg not be understood as condemning the display by capital letters of some interesting piece of news. These notices are satisfactory to the reader. But your newspaper folk have sometimes a trick of interlarding their own heavy dissertations

with those signs of importance, which perpetually recur in their columns, and seem to call in a peremptory manner for notice and admiration, where on inspection you will find nothing extraordinary.

Yet a proper and judicious employment of Italic and capitals, adds grace and a real improvement to composition. The admirable Miss Edgeworth, whose language is as pure and expressive, as her descriptions are faithful and interesting, carries the same exact propriety into the inferior details of composition; even to the regulation of her Italics. With her, these marks are never inexpressive or useless. They always accompany some elegant reference to history, language or science, some pleasing turn of wit, or humorous allusion, some agreeable or fashionable quaintness of expression, peculiar to one class of life, some very emphatical word or phrase, some expression descriptive of national, or family, or professional, or individual character; they always hint to you something new, or they remind you pleasingly of something you have known before. How appropriate and suitable the style of this author; how varied to characters; how sustained in dignity! how worthy "the cause of good sense and virtue," which she so effectually promotes! If any of the writers to whom I alluded, could be supposed gifted with the clear and expressive language that mark the compositions of Miss Edgeworth, how many choice terms, epithets and phrases, would be *showed off* in all the brilliancy of the Italic costume! But I have made a supposition that cannot be admitted; for, where a writer reasons well, and uses language perfectly appropriate, GOOD SENSE,* that essential to correct

*Scribendi recte SAPERE est principium et fons.
Hor. Ars Poetica.

composition will readily suggest the minor details of the printing office.

It is obvious that the marks we are considering cannot confer of *themselves* either strength or grace to composition, and that they should not appear where there is not something remarkable, either in the language or sentiment. I think it might be fairly given as a rule that any original expression, observation or argument, ought not (however worthy it may appear to him) to be put forward in Italics by the author himself: because such blazoning is self-praise, and a call for admiration. The case is different where a writer quotes the work of another for some particular purpose, and is anxious to exhibit his author in a striking manner. But when the writer marks his own best language and arguments, because he considers the former strong and expressive, and the latter peculiarly convincing; he becomes his own commentator, and what is worse his own panegyrist.

Yet there are cases where a writer *may*, with good effect, distinguish by Italics his own words. For instance, in stating a proposition to be proved, or a conclusion drawn, in affirming, denying or repeating pointedly, in stating briefly some plain and important fact, or truth, which your adversary overlooks; any thing on which a controversy hinges, or that otherwise demands particular attention: wherever, in a word, the use of them *goes* not to exhibit the writer himself, but to explain, simplify or enforce his positions, in such cases the Italic marks may be not only agreeable, but useful to the reader. But to mark an epithet or a phrase of one's own, by Italics, merely because it is appropriate, is quite inexcusable. An appropriate expression, is not *therefore* emphatical; and the idea it expresses is of-

ten very unimportant. Neither is there any particular *grace* in correct and appropriate language, and if there were, it does not belong to the author himself, to point it out to observation.

I consider that the language of which an author may point out the beauties, must be in some sense borrowed. Those borrowed graces of expression, which are made more observable by being marked with Italics, may be drawn from various sources: from foreign languages, from a different dialect, or fashionable mode of speech; sometimes they are technicals from the learned professions, or the style of official station, "*parce detorta*"* allusions to facts of history, authentic biography, anecdotes in public, fashionable, or common life; terms appositely and discreetly applied from sciences, or the fine arts, expressions illustrative of the speaker's character, all of which present agreeable pictures to the mind, or recal a succession of interesting recollections and associations. These will be taken in by the mind's-eye with greater facility and effect, if their distant source be intimated, and the author's departure from ordinary style announced to the reader. This purpose is answered by marking with a different letter the adopted words or phrases.

I shall here conclude this paper, which indeed has lengthened much beyond my expectations on commencing it. Some readers will probably think I have said a great deal more "about" this subject, than belongs to it of right, while the *simple question* has received very little illustration by all that has been written. I am not now prepared to obviate these difficulties. I shall only observe here, that as I consider the good use or abuse of Italics in

* *Arts Poetica.*

composition, to be always combined with far greater perfections or faults of style. I could not treat of those marks abstractedly, to any useful or practical purpose. Whoever reforms himself thoroughly from these minor faults, will have first corrected other more serious and deeper-laid vices of composition. C—s.

To the Proprietors of the Belfast Magazine.

GENTLEMEN,

IF you think the following question, and an answer to it, worthy a place in your useful Magazine, you will oblige a constant reader by giving them a corner.

Question. If the apostles and fathers, councils and popes, synods and assemblies, appear agreed on any one article of *faith*; but if Jesus and reason appear agreed on the same article of *faith*, contrary to the former, whether should I endeavour to agree in opinion with the apostles and fathers, councils and popes, synods and assemblies, or with Jesus and reason?

SOCRATES THE YOUNGER.

Giant's Causeway, May 4th, 1813.

Answer. In the first part of your question, the opinions of the apostles and fathers, councils and popes, synods and assemblies, seem to be set in opposition to Jesus and reason; now were you to ask, which of these authorities I would prefer, it would certainly be the latter, because all these descriptions of persons profess to be Christians, or followers of Jesus, and of course, any thing in their doctrine, or opinions obvious and contrary to him they profess to follow, would be both unreasonable and absurd. I am glad to see you combining Jesus and reason; and I am well con-

vinced, you would find on impartial and cool reflection, pardon these expressions, that the religion of Jesus and his service, is altogether reasonable, and the best calculated for the actual condition of men. But we must confess that on this subject of religion, as well as most others, men have widely differed in opinion, and it is no wonder they should, so long as religion is no more than an opinion, that is our system of tenets in the understanding; as every one views this subject as they do every other object of opinion, through the medium of prejudice, education, and pre-conceived impressions. You ask whether you should endeavour to agree in opinion with the former or the latter, I have already stated of how little value opinion is, which we thus endeavour to form, and how liable we are to be mistaken in forming an opinion even on this important subject. It is certainly praiseworthy to endeavour well, but the weakness, the darkness and wickedness of the human heart, blinds and perverts the best powers of the mind, so that we often find infinite difficulty in discovering and ascertaining truth, which is proved by the many divers authorities above noticed; which, as they all differ, more or less, so they cannot all be true: where then shall we find *truth*, that sure anchor of the mind, or what is that reasonable religion of Jesus, to which you seem to advert? I would say, it is not any set of opinions whatsoever, which, for the above reasons, have no sure foundation, but are as various almost as the views and tempers of mankind; but it must be, and is a living principle in the heart, constraining us to a belief and practice, conformable to the known will of God, and beneficial to ourselves and others, teaching us, that deny-